

"Halacha Sources" Highlights - Shabbos HaGadol and its Miracle

Question: Which Shabbos is considered the *Shabbos HaGadol*, in commemoration of what miracle?

Answer: As usual, we will present the material in three steps:

- (1) the *miracles* in the Midrash (cited in this connection by the early authorities),
- (2) the *minhag* to commemorate the above with a "*Shabbos HaGadol*",
- (3) additional *fine points* from the commentaries.

Part 1: The *Miracles* in the Midrash (cited in this connection by the early authorities)

The Tosafos to *Shabbos* (87b) point out that since the Gemara there says that in the year of the Exodus itself, the day of the Exodus itself (the fifteenth of *Nissan*) was a Thursday, it follows that the day on which the Jews had to "take for themselves a lamb for each household" (i.e. the tenth of *Nissan*) [see *Sh'mos* 12:3] was a Shabbos. With this in mind, the Tosafos explain that the *minhag* of calling the Shabbos before Pesach "*Shabbos HaGadol*" (i.e. the Great Shabbos) serves to commemorate the great miracle which took place on that day, as recorded in the Midrash.

Actually, we find *two* miracles. The *Levush* [R. Mordechai Yaffe, 1530 - 1612] describes them as follows:

(1) Each of them took a lamb for his Pesach offering, and the Jews dragged them on the ground in order to disgrace them in the eyes of the Egyptians - who considered the lamb [like] a god [as explained shortly]. [Then,] each Jew tied his lamb to the feet of his bed.

[In response,] the Egyptians asked them: "Why is this [necessary] for you?" [So] they answered: "To slaughter it as a Pesach offering, as Hashem has commanded us!"

And the Egyptians' teeth were grinding over the fact they they were [planning] slaughtering the image of their god, because the Egyptians served the image of the lamb that is among the Zodiac signs (i.e. the constellation Aries) and therefore "it is an abomination to them all who herd sheep" (B'reishis 46:34) and all the more so someone who slaughters one, and [nevertheless] they were powerless to say a thing to them. [(In fact,) the Egyptians girded their swords and sought to murder and wipe out all of the Jews, and Hashem in his mercy protected them - and afflicted the Egyptians with various illnesses so they could not harm Israel (Eliyahu Rabbah citing Kol Bo's version).]

(2) Furthermore, the Jews' answer to them included [the assertion] that HaKadosh Baruch Hu would kill the firstborn of Egypt and save [only] the firstborn of Israel, for He would see the blood and pass over the entrance where the firstborn of Israel [would be]. [In response,] the firstborn of Egypt assembled with their fathers before Pharaoh, to request that Israel be sent free so that they themselves would not be killed, [but] Pharaoh and his ministers were not willing [to do so], and the firstborn waged war in the [capital] city [itself], and killed many of them.

This is [what is hinted by] that which is written (Tehillim 136:10): "[Give thanks] to the Smiter of Egypt through its firstborn." It does not say: "To the Smiter of the firstborn of Egypt," but rather "To the Smiter of Egypt through (i.e. at the hands of) its firstborn" - hinting that the firstborn were the smiters, and not [merely] the smitten.

Part 2: The *Minhag* to Commemorate the Above with a "Shabbos HaGadol"

As mentioned, the Tosafos referred to the *minhag* is being one to "call" this Shabbos "*Shabbos HaGadol*" (i.e. the Great Shabbos), and that is also the description in the *Shulchan Aruch* (O.C. 430:1). The Chida [R. Chaim Yosef Dovid Azulai, Israel and Italy, ~1725 - ~1805] wrote in his *Machzik Bracha* that the *minhag* of "those who are particular" was that on this Shabbos, in place of saying "*Shabbos Shalom UMevorach*" (i.e. the equivalent of "Good Shabbos"), they would instead say "*Shabbos HaGadol Mevorach*" (i.e. "Good *Shabbos HaGadol*").

However, the other authorities do not say to do this, and even the Chida only wrote that "those who are particular" would so it, and I have not heard of this being an accepted practice nowadays either. It seems that the accepted interpretation of the intent of the ancient *minhag* is that the day be "considered special", which is in fact the implication of the *Magen Avraham* [R. Avraham HaLevi (Avli) Gombiner, Poland, ~1637 - 1683] (as cited below). There are a few ways of doing this which have become accepted practices:

(1) The authorities mention *a special lecture*, which is also a way of accomplishing the required "delving into the Halachos of Pesach" [discussed separately in O.C. 429:1 - See our "Halacha Sources Highlights" discussion at <http://www.learnhalacha.com/PesachResearch.pdf>]. However, the *Mishnah Berurah* writes that when the Shabbos before Pesach is in fact *the day* before Pesach, the *minhag* is to hold the lecture on the previous Shabbos.

(2) The Levush describes various versions of a *minhag* to read a special "*haftarah*", which begins with "*V'Arva LaHashem*" [*Malachi* 3:4] and mentions the "Great Day" of Hashem. Some have the *minhag* to read this only when the Shabbos is the day before Pesach, others do precisely the opposite - they read this only when it is *not* the day before Pesach, and some read it in all cases. (The Levush gives reasons for the first and the third versions.)

(3) The *Rema* brings a *minhag* to have a special "preview" reading of the *Haggadah* in the **afternoon** [as discussed separately here in O.C. 430 - our "Halacha Sources Highlights" discussion (as of this writing not available just yet) to be posted as <http://www.learnhalacha.com/HaggadahPreview.pdf>].

(4) As recorded in *siddurim*, there is special liturgical material for the *Shabbos HaGadol* prayer services, which are said in some congregations.

Part 3: Additional *Fine Points* from the Commentaries

The *Beis Yosef* asks: Why aren't *all* these days leading up to Pesach called "great days", since all of them were equally miraculous as far as the Egyptians' "inability to retaliate" was concerned! [The *Eliyahu*

Rabbah points out that the *Kol Bo's* version, that Hashem prevented retaliation by *smiting* the Egyptians, eliminates this question.] The *Beis Yosef* himself answers: The Egyptians were "grinding their teeth" *mainly on that first day*, whereas afterwards they became accustomed to the situation.

The *Magen Avraham* asks: Surely it is the tenth of *Nissan* (i.e. the calendar date) that should have been established as a [kind of] "*Yom Tov*", i.e. even when that falls on a weekday, just as all our other festivals are fixed by calendar dates! The commentaries give various explanations. The *Levush*, for example, writes that it was only due to the the Jews' practice of observing Shabbos that the Egyptians considered it unusual that the Jews were dealing in animals on that Shabbos, and asked them about it ("Why is this Shabbos different from all others?").

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